

THE CASE FOR STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

VISION

In school districts and states throughout the country, teachers, parents, and community members are working together to ensure students master the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in today's world.

This vision begins with a shared understanding of what students need to learn at each grade level and a reliable way to measure students' understanding of the material. It also requires making sure teachers have the supports, resources, and feedback they need to help each child complete grades K-12 on time and graduate well prepared for college and careers.

STATE STANDARDS ARE GUIDELINES TO HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED: To ensure all students are prepared for college and career success after graduation, the Common Core State Standards set clear, consistent guidelines for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level in math and English language arts.

IT IS ALREADY WORKING FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS: While many are just now hearing about the Common Core for the first time, educators have been applying the standards for years in classrooms across the country. And we are already seeing results in improved student performance. In Kentucky, the first state to begin using the Common Core State Standards, the percentage of high school graduates ready for college and careers has increased from 34 percent to 62 percent in four years.

DESIGNED TO MEASURE REAL WORLD SKILLS: To be ready for college and careers, students need to apply their knowledge and skills in areas such as critical-thinking, analytical writing, and problem solving. New assessments have been specifically developed to measure these real-world skills that students will need when they graduate.

IDENTIFY WHETHER STUDENTS ARE ON THE PATH TO SUCCESS: Parents should be able to know whether or not their children have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. The new assessments provide an academic checkup and help teachers and parents know whether students are on track to be college and career ready each step of the way.

CONSISTENT EXPECTATIONS GIVE ALL STUDENTS THE OPPORTUNITY TO SUCCEED: Where a family lives, how much money they make, or their race or ethnicity should not dictate the quality of the education that a child receives or their ability to succeed in college and career. Consistent standards and assessments for students throughout the country mean more students will receive a quality education and have an equal chance to succeed.

NEW ASSESSMENTS WILL REPLACE EXISTING STATE TESTS: The new assessments provide a more accurate picture of student knowledge than previous tests because they ask students to demonstrate and apply what they know, instead of just picking the right answer from a multiple-choice question. Created by experts and educators in states, the new assessments will replace existing end-of-year state assessments in math and English language arts.

NEW MEASURES FOR STUDENT PROGRESS ON THE SKILLS THAT MATTER FOR SUCCESS: The Common Core State Standards will improve student achievement over time. But, as with any change, there is a period of adjustment as teachers and students get used to the new standards and the new tests. Lower test scores do not necessarily mean that schools are performing worse or that students are learning less. It means the tests have changed and are measuring different things—such as where the students are in developing critical-thinking and problem-solving skills and if they are on a path for success.

MATH

BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION IN MATH: Teachers and school leaders are updating the math standards in order to prepare students for an ever-changing world. Teachers are now helping students more deeply understand the concepts they are learning, allowing students to flex their critical-thinking skills as they use and evaluate multiple approaches to tackling everything from simple addition to fractions and algebraic equations.

DEEP UNDERSTANDING IN MATH TRANSLATES TO REAL-WORLD APPLICATION: The math standards are different because what children need to know today is more challenging. The standards emphasize deeper understanding of mathematics so students can apply what they have learned to real-world problems.

VISION: In school districts and states throughout the country, teachers, parents, and community members are working together to ensure students master the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in today's world.

This vision begins with a shared understanding of what students need to learn at each grade level and a reliable way to measure students' understanding of the material. It also requires making sure teachers have the supports, resources, and feedback they need to help each child complete grades K-12 on time and graduate well prepared for college and careers.

- Our education system is not preparing enough of our students for success:
 - Too many students are unable to graduate on time: on average, over 1 million students do not graduate on time each year. Source: *Diplomas Count* (2012).
 - When they do graduate, they are not prepared for college-level work: half of all undergraduates take remedial courses and end up paying college rates for what they should have learned in high school at a cost of nearly \$7 billion annually. Source: *Improving the Targeting of Treatment: Evidence from College Remediation* (2012).
 - Or for the jobs that await them: 88 percent of employers say employees need higher levels of learning and knowledge and that the challenges they face are more complex today than in the past. Source: *Raising the Bar: Employers' View of College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (2010).
 - Including in the military: nearly one quarter of all high school graduates cannot reach the minimum score on the Army's Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) needed to enlist in the army. Source: *Education Trust* (2010).
- Students need to catch up to and compete with their international peers. In 2013, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that out of 34 OECD industrialized nations, 15-year-old students in the United States ranked 17th in reading, 21st in science, and an abysmal 26th in mathematics.
- The future workforce will demand that all students be prepared for higher education. By 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school.
- With the United States working to maintain its economic leadership in the world, our nation needs 22 million students to earn a college degree to meet workforce demands. The United States is expected to fall short by at least three million students because we have not prepared them with the skills and resources to complete college. Source: *Building a Grad Nation* (2012).

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— Memphis Teacher

STATE STANDARDS ARE GUIDELINES TO HELP STUDENTS

SUCCEED: To ensure all students are prepared for college and career success after graduation, the Common Core State Standards establish a set of clear, consistent guidelines for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level in math and English language arts.

- Teachers, principals, and superintendents decide how the standards are applied in the classrooms and choose their own curriculum, just as they always have, allowing for flexibility and creativity.
- Military families have embraced the standards. Approximately 80 percent—or 1.2 million—of children in military families attend public schools, and many military families move within or between states during their children’s K-12 years. For the first time, military parents will have the benefit of knowing that there are consistent, high expectations in a majority of states across the country. In other words, even if a family moves from one state to another, they will know what the goals and expectations are, and their children will be prepared for success in a new school regardless of what grade they are in.
- Teachers believe in the Common Core. Over two-thirds (69 percent) of teachers believe the Common Core will actually improve their classroom practice, and 65 percent agree that the Common Core will improve student learning. *Source: Education Week Research Center (2014).*
- Eighty-four percent of parents favor raising national standards so the United States can be more competitive with other countries. Three in four (74 percent) parents favor voluntary national education standards establishing shared goals and expectations for students across states. *Source: Center for American Progress (2014).*
- Implementation must include extensive professional learning opportunities for teachers so that they can better understand how to effectively use the new standards to maximize learning within the classroom. A recent survey found that 84 percent of teachers cite quality professional development as critical to ensuring successful implementation of the Common Core. *Source: Scholastic Primary Sources (2014).*

IT IS ALREADY WORKING FOR STUDENTS & TEACHERS: While many are just now hearing about the Common Core for the first time, educators have been applying the standards for years in classrooms across the country. And we are already seeing results in improved student performance. In Kentucky, the first state to begin using the Common Core State Standards, the percentage of high school graduates ready for college and careers has increased from 34 percent to 62 percent in four years.

- In 2014, the college and career readiness rates in Kentucky jumped to 62.3 percent—up from 54.1 percent last year and 47.2 percent in 2012. The four-year graduation rate is up as well—from 86.1 percent in 2012-13 to 87.4 percent in the 2013-14 school year.

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— Louisiana Mother of Three

Voices from the Field:

- ★ *Leigh Pourciau, an eighth-grade teacher in New Orleans*, attests to how the standards have helped her “touch on several different categories to teach one strategy. Because of that, my students have begun to see the connections among the skills, which has made them more fully literate thinkers, speakers, writers, and readers.”
- ★ *Jessica Pointer, a teacher from Memphis*, points out that the Common Core “emphasizes what kids should learn (that’s the standards) and empowers teachers to focus on the ‘how.’”
- ★ *Former Atlanta high school teacher Joshua Delaney* “will never forget the day my students were debating the differences between linear and exponential relationships using real-world examples such as phone payment plans and annual bank interest rates.”
- ★ *Fifth-grade teacher Tina Colella in Florida* has appreciated how students are now expected to understand the material and not just regurgitate it. “Now, we guide them,” Colella said. “Our job is to teach the understanding.”
- ★ *Former Colorado Teacher of the Year Seth Berg* credits the Common Core for allowing him to teach multiple concepts just by showing his students a single video of dominoes falling: “These domino problems jump about to include time, money, estimation, place-value, adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing. . . . Prior to Common Core, showing this video would have been hard to justify because it doesn’t clearly address a specific skill. But when we cluster several concepts, the mathematics is extremely rich.”
- ★ *Heather Blanchard, a parent of three*, explains how she judges the Common Core—by what she has seen in her children: “And our other twin has blossomed under this new approach. Because the material is presented to her in several different ways, there are more opportunities for the material to “click.” She has become less frustrated and more engaged, and we can see the difference in her attitude toward learning.”

- Under Common Core, Tennessee schools have made impressive gains. This year, the state’s average ACT scores made the biggest gains since it began testing students, and last year the combined fourth- and eighth-grade student math and reading scores made the biggest gains of any state in the country.
- Teachers across the country are already seeing huge improvements in student learning; 53 percent of teachers say they are already seeing a positive impact on students’ ability to think critically and use reasoning skills. Source: *Scholastic Primary Sources* (2014).
- In fact, multiple polls show that the longer schools, districts, and states have been using the standards, the more likely teachers and school leaders are to say that they are working well. Source: *Scholastic Primary Sources*, *Gallup*, and *Center on Education Policy* (2014).

Voices from the Field:

- ★ Reflecting on the practice run of the PARCC assessments this past spring, *New Jersey principal Emil Carafa* said that students are challenged to demonstrate their knowledge in more meaningful ways. “Students are asked to look deeper into their reading pieces, and they have to connect items together. . . . It is no longer a read the question pick an answer.” He went on to say that “[t]he math seemed to be more involved. . . . Some problems ask the student what is wrong with the problem and how can they correct it. This is different than what we have been doing in [state] assessments.”
- ★ *Illinois educator Terry Mootz* said, “Students are deeply engaged. . . teachers felt the assessment is worthy of preparation, rather than a distraction from quality learning and instruction.” He went on to praise PARCC as an effort to move beyond factual recall and discrete knowledge, which he said has been the hallmark of achievement testing and accountability for the last 15 years. Now, Mootz says that the process honors what learning truly represents: “The transfer and application of these facts and knowledge to reflect true student understanding of critical content concepts and apply these in a variety of situations.”
- ★ *Taylor McGraw, a fifth-grade teacher from New York*, praised Common Core assessments for the way they “do not merely test students’ ability to find right answers; they target conceptual understanding with the types of problems students will encounter in the real world.”
- ★ *New York teacher Trevor Baisden* is confident that next-generation assessments can “gather critical information about our students’ growth and our own teaching practice, while acknowledging that this potential will be lost if we ignore the need for improvements to our current system.”
- ★ *Idaho superintendent Greg Bailey* said students have reacted positively to the new assessments. “The kids are stating that they like the test better. It’s not as monotonous as in the past.”
- ★ *Oregon Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction Rob Saxton* announced that 25,000 Oregon students from 90 school districts across the state participated in the field test of the new Smarter Balanced Assessment this spring. Students report that while the test is harder, it is also more interesting and engaging. One sixth-grader said this was “the first test I’ve ever taken where I actually learned something while taking it.” She described it as a “cool, new experience.”
- ★ A *California eighth-grader* who participated in the practice run of the Smarter Balanced assessment remarked that the assessment “tests your brain more.”

DESIGNED TO MEASURE REAL WORLD SKILLS: To be ready for college and careers, students need to apply their knowledge and skills in areas such as critical-thinking, analytical writing, and problem solving. New assessments have been specifically developed to measure these real-world skills that students will need when they graduate.

- Moving far beyond simply memorizing facts and figures, the new standards challenge students to develop a deeper understanding of subject matter, learn how to think critically, and apply what they are learning in real-world contexts. The new assessments push students to apply these skills in a variety of ways. Seventy-two percent of teachers agree that the Common Core will improve students' abilities to think critically and use reasoning skills. Source: *Scholastic Primary Sources* (2014).
- Nine in 10 district leaders agree that the Common Core are more rigorous than their state's previous standards, and three quarters agree that the Common Core will lead to improved skills in math and English language arts among the students in their district. Source: *Center on Education Policy* (2014).
- 73 percent of teachers agree the Common Core standards set higher expectations for student performance than the previous state-by-state standards. Source: *EdNext* (2014).
- Support for Common Core and related assessments is strong amongst superintendents, with 73 percent of superintendents saying the standards are "just about right" for most students and two thirds (64 percent) voicing support for staying the course with the assessment consortia. Source: *Gallup* (2014).
- Every student is unique and learns differently, but all students need to master a basic set of skills and knowledge to be successful in the real world. These assessments are designed to measure students' mastery of those skills, so more children graduate ready for college and career.
- Many teachers are already seeing a positive impact on their students' ability to effectively present their ideas based on evidence, to think critically and use reasoning skills, to read and comprehend informational texts, to use real-world tools and resources, and to work collaboratively with peers. Teachers in schools that have fully implemented the Common Core are even more likely to have seen a positive impact on their students' critical-thinking skills. Source: *Scholastic Primary Sources* (2014).

IDENTIFY WHETHER STUDENTS ARE ON THE PATH TO SUCCESS:

Parents should be able to know whether or not their children have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed. The new assessments provide an academic checkup and help teachers and parents know whether students are on track to be college and career ready each step of the way.

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— New York Teacher

- In addition to the end-of-year assessments, some schools will also take advantage of assessments teachers can use in the classroom that are designed to give teachers, parents, and students meaningful feedback. These progress checks will identify when students need more help and when they have mastered the material and are ready to move on.
- Assessments given early in the school year will provide parents and teachers with an early warning signal to identify where a student is struggling and if they need extra support.

CONSISTENT EXPECTATIONS GIVE ALL STUDENTS THE OPPORTUNITY TO SUCCEED:

Where a family lives, how much money they make, or their race or ethnicity should not dictate the quality of the education that a child receives or their ability to succeed in college and career. Consistent standards and assessments for students throughout the country mean more students will receive a quality education and have an equal chance to succeed.

- The academic achievement gap disproportionately affects students of color. African American, Hispanic, and low-income students in two-year colleges are much more likely to be required to take remedial courses, with 67 percent of African Americans, 58 percent of Hispanics, and 64 percent of low-income students requiring remediation. Source: *Complete College America* (2012).
- We do not need to look any further than graduation rates to see how much we need the Common Core State Standards to level the playing field and help prepare every single student for success, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or zip code.
 - When students do not graduate from high school, their opportunities shrink. They have fewer good job opportunities.
 - The high school graduation rate for Hispanic students is 76 percent and for African-American students it is 68 percent, which is about 10 to 15 percent less than the graduation rate of white students. Source: *GradNation* (2014).
- Going to college expands opportunities, and earning a college degree expands opportunity even further and increases the likelihood of a healthy, productive, and fulfilling life. Of students who enrolled in public colleges and universities only 19.5 percent of Hispanics and only 22.8 percent of African American students graduated from four-year schools in 2010. For white students, the figure is 33.6 percent. Source: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010 data).

NEW ASSESSMENTS WILL REPLACE EXISTING TESTS: The new assessments provide a more accurate understanding of student knowledge than previous tests because they ask students to show and apply what they know, instead of just picking the right answer from a multiple-choice question. Created by experts and educators in states, the new assessments will replace existing end-of-year state assessments in math and English language arts.

“It tests your
brain more.”

— California Eighth-Grader

- The new assessments offer significant improvements over tests of the past, including writing at every grade, new question types, and performance tasks that ask students to demonstrate an array of research, writing, and problem-solving skills.
- The new assessments are not an apples-to-apples comparison to old assessments, so previous scores cannot be weighed against new proficiency levels. They redefine what it means to be proficient based on the new standards to ensure success after graduation.

NEW, REALISTIC MEASURES FOR STUDENT PROGRESS: The Common Core State Standards and assessments will improve student achievement over time. But, as with any change, there is a period of adjustment as teachers and students get used to the new standards and tests. Lower test scores do not mean schools are performing worse or that students are learning less. Rather, they provide a more accurate measure of how students are doing in reading and math, and if they are on a path for success.

- In Kentucky, the first state to begin using the Common Core standards, student test scores went down at first. But the percentage of high school graduates ready for college and careers increased from 34 percent to 62 percent in four years.
- Although the scores SEEM lower than in previous years, it is not fair to compare the new results to the old because these are new tests that measure different skills. We should think of these scores as a fresh start. What happens next is what matters, not what happened before.
- Most states are providing an adjustment period for teachers to gain experience in teaching lessons aligned with the new standards, and for students to acclimate to the new standards and the related assessments.

“The kids are stating that they like the test better. It’s not as monotonous as in the past.”

— Idaho Superintendent

MATH

BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION IN MATH: Teachers and school leaders are updating the math standards in order to prepare students for an ever-changing world. Teachers are now helping students more deeply understand the concepts they are learning, allowing students to flex their critical-thinking skills as they use and evaluate multiple approaches to tackling everything from simple addition to fractions and algebraic equations.

- Building a conceptual knowledge of math year-after-year positions students to graduate high school prepared to succeed in college-level math courses. This approach not only allows students to skip the time and cost of remedial courses, but also gives them the ability to apply the math skills that they have learned in real life.
- It is not enough for students to merely know multiplication tables in third grade, but students must also understand the concept of multiplication, what it represents, and be able to apply that understanding to solving real-world problems.

- Students are still expected to know the traditional approach to solving basic math problems—but there is a new emphasis on helping students gain a deeper understanding of the concepts.
- Students will no longer rely on tricks to solve math problems. Instead, they are challenged to understand how the numbers relate to each other through real-world scenarios. For example, challenging students to figure out the temperature difference overnight: if we start at six degrees and then overnight drops to negative four, students may first think the answer is two, but when they view a thermometer (a real-world number line), they see that the difference in the two numbers is 10.
- Math is more than just a series of steps taken to find the answer. Think of arithmetic like a recipe, where raw ingredients (the numbers) are used in a series of steps that result in a finished product (the answer). An experienced baker understands why butter and sugar are creamed before eggs and flour are added. A beginner just following the recipe will not have this understanding. Students need to learn what to do AND understand why it works. They must learn to be problem-solvers who think critically, can defend an argument, and apply knowledge to new situations, building upon what they know.
- Learning for understanding takes time. To make that possible, the math standards focus on covering fewer math topics in greater depth. This provides time for students to solve problems, think critically, and provides opportunities to apply their knowledge in different ways to demonstrate that they have mastered the concept.

DEEP UNDERSTANDING IN MATH TRANSLATES TO REAL WORLD

APPLICATION: The math standards are different because what children need to know today is more challenging. The standards and assessments emphasize deeper understanding of mathematics so students can apply what they have learned to real-world problems.

- Teaching for understanding has proven successful in top-performing countries, U.S. states and schools districts, with students, teachers, and parents all seeing real benefits once they get used to it.
- The way many of us learned math—focused on speed, memorization, and simply finding the answer—has not helped the majority of students retain or apply what they learned outside of school. When tested on their math skills, American adults ranked third-to-last compared to other developed countries. The Common Core pushes students to thoroughly understand math concepts so they can apply them later in life.
- To live in our world today, all Americans need to know mathematical concepts and skills, as well as how, when and why to apply them—not only to produce the next generation of scientists, mathematicians, and inventors, but also because understanding math in this way will help all Americans make informed, thoughtful decisions about personal finances, health, and work.